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Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

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Once Again: Academic Freedom and Higher Education

In slightly concerning commentary on the state of higher education, the University of Chicago has gotten lots of positive press in recent days for a **letter** the Dean of Students John Ellison sent to entering students. He writes:

Welcome and congratulations on your acceptance to the College at the University of Chicago. Earning a place in our community of scholars is no small achievement and we are delighted that you selected Chicago to continue your intellectual journey.

Once here you will discover that one of the University of Chicago's defining characteristic is our commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression. This is captured in the University's faculty report on freedom of expression. Members of our community are encouraged to speak, write, listen, challenge and learn, without fear of censorship. Civility and mutual respect are vital to all of us, and freedom of expression does not mean the freedom to harass or threaten others. You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.

Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called "trigger warnings," we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual "safe spaces" where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.

Fostering the free exchange of ideas reinforces a related University priority—building a campus that welcomes people of all backgrounds. Diversity of opinion and background is a fundamental strength of our community. The members of our community must have the freedom to espouse and explore a wide range of ideas.

I am enclosing a short monograph by Dean John W. Boyer, the Martin A. Ryerson Distinguished Service Professor in History and Dean of the College, which provides a helpful primer. This monograph, entitled, "Academic Freedom and the Modern University: The Experience of the University of Chicago," recounts the history of debate, and even scandal, resulting from our commitment to academic freedom.

If you are interested in some of the source material mentioned in Dean Boyer's book, you can find links to

the important reports (e.g. the Kalven report, the Stone report, etc.) at the website maintained by our University provost at <http://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/>.

Again, welcome to the University of Chicago. See you in September!

The letter is not so striking for what it says but for the fact that it was written at all.

It is surely an unflattering comment on the apparent state of higher education if students need to be told that their education will be uncomfortable. The whole point of an education, of course, is to be exposed to new ideas, to explore different ways of thinking, to be stretched and moved beyond one's current views, to be challenged intellectually.



Photo cutiemoo via Flickr

My quibble with Dean Ellison's letter is the slightly self-aggrandizing tone which implies that maybe the University of Chicago is one of the few places with a current commitment to free speech and academic freedom.

While Chicago should be praised for its direct and clear commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression, I believe the letter's tone and the strong response to it paint a distorted view of higher education. The protection of academic freedom and free speech should not be taken for granted, but these remain strongly held values in most of higher education.

Those who make their careers in the academy understand and widely support academic freedom, and even students who are new to this world usually have an intuitive sense that the exchange of ideas and the challenging of individual beliefs is central to a good education.

So happy new school year. Absolutely defend freedom of inquiry and expression, but don't lose too much sleep over the intellectual barbarians at the gate.

By **Michael Hemesath** | September 6th, 2016 | Categories: **Higher Education** | **3 Comments**

About the Author: **Michael Hemesath**



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] **PrezHemesath**.